



A typology of child abduction events

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Purpose. This study examined the offence of child abduction in England and Wales. Specifically, the relationship of perpetrator to victim and motivation of the perpetrator were considered. It was hypothesized that discrete types of child abduction would be identifiable.

Methods. The sample consisted of all offenders convicted of child abduction between 1993 and 1995 identified by the Offenders Index. For each conviction further data were gathered from police records at New Scotland Yard. The resulting sample comprised 149 offenders. These offenders were categorized in terms of relationship to victim and motivation.

Results. Four different motivational types of child abduction were identified: sexual, custodial, maternal desire, and 'other'. The majority of child abductions were sexually motivated, and most child abductions involved female victims.

Conclusions. Offence categories are useful for summarizing criminal data but mask factors such as relationship of the perpetrator to the victim, and motivation.

Boudreaux, Lord, and Etter (2000) provide an extensive review of research on child abduction in the USA. The review found that most child abductions are familial (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990; McGuire, 1994). Of these familial abductions, the abductor was usually male (55%; Hegar & Greif, 1991), and the victims were more likely to be pre-school children aged 3–5 years (34%; Forehand, Long, & Zogg, 1989). The motivation for familial abductions was primarily gaining custody of the child (Forehand *et al.*, 1989). Non-familial abductions, however, were mainly sexually motivated (60%) (Boudreaux, Lord, & Dutra, 1999). Asdigian, Finkelhor, and Hotaling (1995) found that, apart from sexual motivation, child abduction was also motivated by robbery facilitation, hijackings, acts of retribution, intimidation, terrorizing, and dating violence (in which males abducted ex-girlfriends to force them back into a relationship). Sexually motivated child abductions were found to be more likely to occur with older school-age children (Boudreaux *et al.*, 1999).

There is little published research regarding child abduction in the United Kingdom. However, official criminal statistics published by the Home Office in England and Wales (Home Office, 1999) provide some insight into child abduction. Here, child abduction is categorized as a violent offence. On average there were 44 convictions per year for the years 1992–1998, or 0.12% of all violent convictions in a year, making child abduction a rare event. However, this does not undermine the seriousness of this offence.

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Table 1. Offences relating to child abduction

Offence	Description
Abduction of an unmarried girl under the age of 16	Applies to child abductions involving female victims. Classified as a sexual offence in official criminal statistics.
Child abduction	Applies to child abductions involving either male or female victims. Classified as a violent offence in official criminal statistics.

Note. Currently there is no offence category relating to the sexual abduction of a male child.

This study tests some of the findings of the American literature on a cohort of child abduction convictions from England and Wales. The study examines the nature of child abduction offences in England and Wales in terms of the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim, and the apparent motivation for the offence. It is hypothesized that for the offence of child abduction, discrete offence types can be identified. It is also hypothesized that for the majority of child abduction offences, the motivation is sexual. It is hypothesized that a majority of child abductions are sexual because in England and Wales there is no offence that addresses the sexual abduction of a male child (there is an offence addressing the sexual abduction of a female child—refer to Table 1 in the Method section). It is hypothesized therefore, that child abduction involving a male child will be prosecuted as ‘child abduction’ (categorized as a violent offence). Finally, it is hypothesized that a large proportion of sexually motivated child abductions will be against male victims, as there is no specific offence in England and Wales relating to the sexual abduction of a male.

Method

The Offenders Index (OI) was used to generate a sample of offenders who had been convicted of the offence of child abduction between 1993 and 1995. In official criminal statistics there are two offences relating to the abduction of children (see Table 1). The current study examined the offence of child abduction, which is categorized as violence against the person.

The OI is a computerized Home Office database and holds criminal conviction history data for England and Wales (Friendship, Thornton, Erikson, & Beech, 2001). A total of 191 child abduction convictions was identified. For each conviction further details of the child abduction offence was examined using police records at New Scotland Yard (microfiche data and the Police National Computer) (Friendship *et al.*, 2001). Police records typically included a detailed summary of the specific offence. Child abduction convictions were excluded from the sample if no summary was found in police records. The resulting sample consisted of 149 offenders. Child abduction events were categorized on the basis of offence summaries, with reference to relationship to victim and motivation. The coding frame used can be found in Table 2.

Inter-rater reliability analysis produced a κ value of .90, a high level of agreement (Bauer, 2000; Cohen, 1960).

Subjects

Summaries of the offenders’ criminal histories and age at abduction offence are shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Coding frame

Victim relationship	Sub-category	Motivation
Familial	Mother	Custody/guardianship
		Sexual
		Maternal desire
	Father	Other
		Custody/guardianship
		Sexual
		Maternal desire
	Other relative	Other
		Custody/guardianship
Non-familial	Male (stranger/acquaintance)	Sexual
		Maternal desire
		Other
	Female (stranger/acquaintance)	Custody/guardianship
		Sexual
		Maternal desire
		Other

Table 3. Mean scores of criminal history variables by motivation (N=149)

Motivation	No. previous appearances of any kind		No. previous sexual appearances		No. previous violent appearances		No. previous child abduction appearances		Age at abduction conviction	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Custody of child	2.44	(6.22)	0.00	(0.00)	0.33	(1.39)	0.00	(0.00)	36.24	(8.01)
Sexual	5.62	(7.00)	1.12	(1.99)	0.69	(1.13)	0.07	(0.25)	38.66	(13.35)
Maternal desire	0.47	(0.80)	0.00	(0.00)	0.06	(0.24)	0.00	(0.00)	26.27	(9.94)
Other	11.14	(22.43)	0.07	(0.27)	1.71	(3.81)	0.00	(0.00)	38.52	(10.58)

Note. The term appearance is defined as a court appearance where an offender has been sentenced.

Results

It was found that 82% of child abduction offences were committed by a non-familial perpetrator, and 18% were committed by a family member of the child concerned (Table 4). The table also shows that 17% of all abductions involved a parent taking a child. In 1% of familial abductions (one case), a half-sister abducted her younger sibling. Wanting custody was the motive behind all of the familial abductions.

The majority of all child abduction events studied here were sexually motivated (60%). 'Maternal desire' for a baby or a child motivated 12% of all abduction events in the sample (Fig. 1).

Table 4. Child abduction events: the relationship of offender to the victim (N=149)

Relationship	Proportion of child abductions (%)
Non-familial male	66
Non-familial female	16
Familial—father taking child	12
Familial—mother taking child	5
Familial—non-parental relative taking child	1

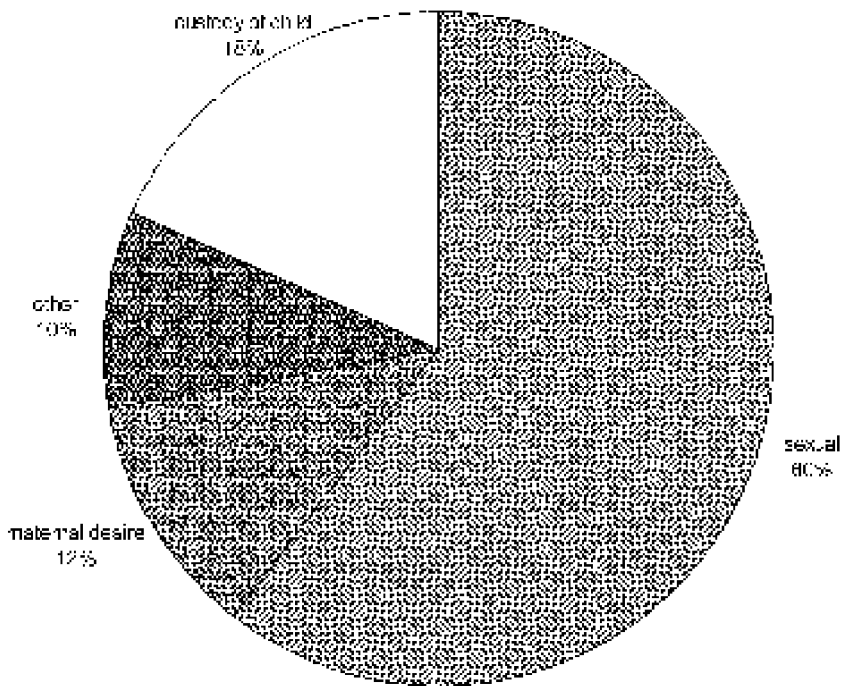


Figure 1. Apparent motivation of familial and non-familial child abduction (N=149).

Victim characteristics were not identified for all abductions. Data were present for victim age in 69% of cases and victim gender in 77% of cases. Where it was present, the data showed that there were more female than male victims, both for all abduction events (62%, $N=115$), and within the sexually motivated group (60%, $N=83$). The mean victim age was highest for sexually motivated abductions (10 years, $N=65$, $SD=3.7$) and lowest for the ‘maternal desire’ group (1 year, $N=14$, $SD=1.2$). An independent t -test comparing victim age for sexual and non-sexual abductions showed that the victims of sexual abduction were significantly older ($t=8.514$, $d.f.=99$, $p<.001$). A χ^2 test examining the relationship between victim gender and sexual/non-sexual abduction showed no significant association, i.e. sexual abductors were not more likely to target children of a particular gender ($\chi^2=0.314$, $d.f.=1$, $p=.575$).

Discussion

This study represents the first detailed analysis of child abduction in the UK and has broadly similar findings to US research. Most child abductions were non-familial (82%). Non-familial, male, sexually motivated child abduction formed the largest group (60% of all child abductions in this sample). This supports the initial hypothesis that the offence category 'child abduction' is predominantly a sexually motivated offence. Where gender was identified, more females than males were the victims of sexually motivated child abduction. This is contrary to the research hypothesis that a large proportion of sexually motivated child abductions would involve male victims. One explanation for this is that it is harder evidentially to prove a sexual offence in court, and that through plea-bargaining and the idiosyncrasies of the English legal system some sexual offending results in conviction for violent offending (Furby, Weinrott, & Blackshaw, 1989; Prentky & Burgess, 2000; Quinsey, Grant, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998). In the case of some child abductions against a female victim, the prosecution may opt for a charge that is more likely to secure a conviction (Harris & Grace, 1999).

In terms of the four types of child abduction, the following results were found:

- (1) The sexually motivated group was the only group that had a history of child abduction; they also had the largest mean number of previous sexual offences. These offenders also have histories of general offending and violent offending. In keeping with Boudreaux *et al.*'s (1999) work, this group was also found to have the highest mean victim age.
- (2) The 'maternal desire' group was entirely composed of non-familial female perpetrators. This group appears to be motivated by a need to fulfil a maternal role (Ankrom & Lent, 1995). This group was the least criminal of all four groups and were often younger than other abductors at the time of the offence. This group also had the lowest mean victim age.
- (3) The 'other motivation' group, rather than forming a discrete category in and of itself, represents child abductions with a mixture of motivations ranging from religion (abductions by members of a religious sect), to theft (somebody stealing a car with young children in the back seat). These abductions do not fit into any of the other categories. Although they are diverse, these abductions generally fit the 'violent' characterization of child abduction presently embraced by official criminal statistics. This group was entirely composed of non-familial abductors and had the highest mean number of appearances for violent offences. They also had the highest mean number of appearances for any kind of offence. The high standard deviation for number of appearances of any kind indicated a large degree of variability in criminal history, probably due to the mixed motivations of this group.
- (4) The 'custody of child' motivated group predictably consisted of exclusively familial perpetrators. This group mostly consisted of 'tug-of-love' cases between estranged parents (only rarely involving a non-parental family member). More fathers than mothers or other relatives abducted. This group had low means for sexual and violent offending. For this group, the victim tended to be younger than in other groups.

This sample of child abductors excludes cases of child abduction where the abduction was considered *incidental* to a more serious aspect of the crime (e.g. where it ended in homicide) and the offender was convicted only of the more serious offence. It also excludes child abductions where no offence summary was found.

Conclusions

Offence categories are useful for summarizing criminal data. They are, however, crude, and mask factors such as the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim and offence motivation. Child abductions, in particular, are not homogeneous events, and this study identified discrete offence types. It is misleading that child abduction is categorized in criminal statistics as a violent offence. The results of this study demonstrated a high proportion of sexually motivated abductions.

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